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ABSTRACT

Literature on the American family that is pertinent to pediatrics is reviewed. Family characteristics considered include fertility, family structure, divorce, maternal employment and child care arrangements, family wealth and poverty, governmental assistance, and adolescent sexuality. Other topics of discussion include problematic effects of family transitions; poor black children as constituting a population that is at special risk; effects of maternal employment; sexual abuse allegations in divorce; convergence of abuse of children and women; effects of stress on children; pediatric social illness; homelessness; violence; and violent death. Future directions for practice, particularly the family support movement and the work and family movement, are considered. A total of 15 annotated references are provided. (RH)

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Family transition, stress, and support: impacts on children

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The family is changing, and giving care to children is increasingly associated with economic burdens and social stresses. Because the family is the principal nurturing unit of the child, there is a growing interest by behavioral and social scientists in the connections between these changes and the status of children. Much of this literature has direct pertinence to pediatrics.

The changing American family

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A transformation in the family has taken place without much notice in the last two decades. A summary of the state of U.S. children and their families was compiled by the Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families of the U.S. House of Representatives from the principal U.S. data archives (1). It gives a lively view of the principal trends. These are briefly summarized here, with a focus on data in the report which have particular bearing on comprehending the meaning of the family literature to pediatrics.

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Fertility

Although the number of births per 1,000 women has fallen in most age and racial groups from the peaks accorded during the baby boom, the fertility rates for young white teenagers have increased 20% between 1970 and 1986. Black teenagers' fertility rates remain substantially higher than whites', although they show a general decline.

Generally, women with higher levels of education bear fewer children. Between 1950 and 1986, births to unmarried mothers increased from 4% to 23% of all births. The number of births to married women has declined, even as the number of births to unmarried mothers increased by a factor of five, from 142,000 in 1950 to 878,000 in 1986.

Family structure

Parallel to these changes has been a dramatic change in family living arrangements between 1981 and 1988. The proportion of children living with both their mothers and fathers has decreased from 67% to 60%. Children living with their mothers increased in this interval from 11.6 million (18% of all children) to 16.5 million (21%). Children living only with their fathers increased in this period by the factor of two, but only to 3% of all children.

Divorce

There are now approximately one divorce for every two marriages, and nearly 2% of all children (in excess of a million children) experience parental divorce each year. The number of children living with divorced mothers increased two-fold between 1970 and 1986.

After divorce, there is a dramatic decline in the economic status of children and women. This is associated with low rates of payment of child support by absent fathers; only 37% of these mothers receive child support. Women are more likely to receive support when they are white and well educated.

Maternal employment and child care arrangements

Mothers' participation in the workplace has increased substantially. The proportion of school-age children with working mothers has risen between 1970 and 1988 from 43% to 64%; for children under six, from 29% to 51%. By 1988, more than half of mothers with infants 12 months of age or less were working or were looking for work. Between 1975 and 1988, the greatest increase in mothers employed full-time has been among women whose youngest child is under three; the proportion increased from 19% to 32%.

In the face of a general shortage of child care services, many women have no choice but to make improvised arrangements for the care of their children. The proportion of children with full-time mothers under five years of age who are cared for in day care centers increased from 8% to 30% in the interval 1965-1985. The use of family day care increased from 20% to 27%; the proportion cared for in their own homes fell from 47% to 23%. For many families, not one but several child care providers are needed, and these arrangements may change from week to week.

Of the 2.1 million children between the ages of 5 and 13 who have no adult to care for them after school, 500,000 are cared for by relatives or neighbors under the age of 14. No care is provided for 1.6 million. This includes 1% of 5-year-olds, 6% of 9-year-olds, and 14% of 13-year-olds.

Family wealth and poverty

The median family incomes of homes with children declined between 1970 and 1985. Far less adequate incomes are available to female-headed households, whose adjusted family incomes declined from 12,136 to 9,838 1987 dollars between 1970 and 1987.

Generally, white families are very much better off than black and Hispanic families. The median family incomes of white children were twice those of black children in 1987 and 1.75 times those of Hispanic children.

There was a substantial change in the poverty rate for children between 1970 and 1987, with a rise from 15% to 20%. The poverty rate for black children was 45% in 1987; for Hispanic children it was 39%. Impressively, the poverty rate for children in female headed households was twice that of all children, or 55%. For children under 6 in female headed families, the poverty rate was three times that of all children under 6.

Governmental assistance

Notwithstanding these impressive and worrisome figures, both child support and governmental assistance programs fall far short of what is needed to bring children out of poverty. More than half of children in poverty remain poor despite receiving some public income transfers, including, for example, welfare payments and food stamps. Although children in female headed families are more likely to receive these payments, children are much more likely to be lifted out of poverty by income transfers if they live in two-parent families. (This is attributable in part to the declining value of the minimum wage, which is now insufficient to bring a family of four up to the poverty line.) Even with two incomes and income transfers, many families are barely able to sustain lives above the poverty line.

The principal dependency program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) reached only 56% of children in poverty in 1987. One in nine of all children received some AFDC support in this year. Where in 1975, 73% of poor children received AFDC, the figure had dropped to 50% by 1982.

Adolescent sexuality

The 1970's and 1980's have seen substantial increases in the prevalence of young unmarried women who have had sexual intercourse. In 1988, a quarter of 15 year old girls reported having had sexual intercourse at least once. By 19, 81% reported having had intercourse. The black-white differences in the percentages of girls' sexual experience narrowed impressively by the late 1980's.

Boys' sexual activity increased between 1979 and 1988, with an increase in rates of sexual experience from 78%-88% in 19 year olds. Use of contraceptives also increased. Condom use doubled between 1979 and 1988, and the proportion using no method of birth control declined from 51% to 21%.

Approximately 11% of girls aged 15-19 become pregnant each year. Abortion rates increased during the 1970's and have remained stable during the 1980's. Slightly more than 4% of female teenagers aged 15-19 have abortions each year. Approximately 5% of 15-19 year old girls give birth each year.

This snapshot view of the family suggests an increasing set of burdens with which children must contend. The impact of poverty is evident. Not so clear are the impacts of family transitions.

Problematic impacts of family transitions

In a review of children's coming to terms with divorce and remarriage, Hetherington (2) reports a longitudinal study in which the adverse outcomes appear importantly to be affected by children's individual characteristics, including temperment; family relationships; and such extra-familial factors as external sources of stress, school and peer supports or problems, and parental employment.

A clinically-focused examination of the functioning of 184 middle class divorcing families was reported by Tschann, Johnston, Kline, and Wallerstein (3). Before separating, the families had median incomes of $35,000. Most of the parents were college educated, and no parents had remarried at the time of the onset of the study. The sample included 351 children 18 and younger; they reported here the experiences of the 178 children who are the oldest in their sibships, of whom 51% were boys. (Boys and girls comprised similar proportions of the age distributions, which were 21% 2-5 years old, 41% 6-11 years old and 38% 12-18 years old.) Most children were in maternal custody (73%); 7% were in the father's sole custody; 19% were in joint custody.

The quality of parent-child relationships predicted levels of emotional and behavioral impairment in children after the parents separated. The level of marital conflict prior to divorce was, in turn, importantly associated with the quality of parent-child relationships. But it appeared that a good relationship with one or both parents was more important to the psychological adjustment of the child than the extent of marital conflict.

Children's behavioral disturbances appeared to be associated with their being caught between their mothers and fathers in continuing struggles; most problematic for children were fathers who involved their children in parental conflicts and who turned to them for their principal emotional supports.

This study accords with the Hetherington's finding that individual children's characteristics, including tempermental attributes, have important bearing on the quality of the parent-child relationship. Fathers' behavior toward their children was affected more by the children's temperment as infants than by marital conflict. Children who had more difficult temperments as babies suffered more problematic emotional adjustments after their parents separated.

Tschann and colleagues suggest that to the extent possible parents should remain warm and empathetic toward their children, avoid involving children in conflicts, using children for emotional support, and rejecting them. They should communicate consistently their expectations that children behave in ways appropriate for their ages. If they are able to do this, it appears that they may be able to buffer children against the stresses of divorce. Preventive counseling interventions with divorcing parents, perhaps even prior to the parents' separation, is recommended.

Poor, black children: a population at special risk

Marital break-up is more prevalent among blacks, and the subsequent economic stresses on black mothers and children are more severe. The state of the black family is receiving more open, explicit, and thoughtful attention. Black children's experiences of psychological distress, parenting, and emotional development in the face of economic adversity was the subject of a thorough-going treatment by McLoyd (4).

In addition to the social and emotional stresses associated with life in poverty, black children must contend with institutional barriers deriving from patterns of racial discrimination, for example with respect to housing and educational and employment opportunities.

Black children suffer from more psychological problems than white children. These are associated with a range of life events and chronic conditions which produce frustration and which are not subject to their or their parents' personal control, including eviction of their families, criminal assaults on them and on their kin, and acute and chronic physical illness for which medical care may not be accessible. A black child is more likely than a white child to live in a social context in which the neighborhood is dangerous, where housing is inadequate, and where there are multiple sources of stress. Because black families have fewer financial resources, stressful life events can precipitate additional or secondary crises, as for example, when a family may relocate after a fire and there is not enough money to purchase food, to properly secure an apartment, to buy furniture, and to bring an ill child to a physician.

Economic hardship seems to exert an important impact on black parent-child relationships. Poor black mothers are more likely to use power-assertive techniques in child discipline. They are also generally less supportive of their children, valuing obedience more, using reasoning less, and more likely to use physical punishment as a means of socializing children. The quality of black father-child relationships is also importantly associated with poverty, with more serious problems associated with more severe economic distress. Black parents who experience job loss or severe losses of income appear to be more punitive and less nurturing in their caregiving. When stresses accumulate, there is a greater likelihood of such disturbances in parenting as child abuse.

A splendid discussion of factors which appear to buffer the negative effects of economic hardship on the functioning of black children and parents is given by McLoyd. (As with most of the paper, this treatment would appear to generalize nicely to all economically distressed parents and children, although the focus is on black families.) Parents' social networks serve importantly to affect parenting behavior, especially with regard to imposing sanctions and controls against harsh punishments. They help parents' dispositions and support the development of consistency and positive nurturance in the giving of care. Emotional support is provided to parents by intimate relationships and friendships. Poor mothers who received higher levels of emotional support report feeling much less overwhelmed by their situations than mothers who were unsupported. The parents' social networks also provide information and role modeling as well as hands-on help in child care.

Giving parents assistance with the parenting role, most especially with child care, helps parents substantially. This can be in the context of a collaborative child care arrangement, an ad hoc relationship, or, a formalized child-care program. Child-care in this context can be seen as a family service.

Characteristics of the community may buffer the experience of poverty. The availability of a neighborhood social network to a parent may enable the parent effectively to contend with stressful or emergent situations. In poor black communities, the practice of child-keeping, where a mother may place temporarily a child in another home, usually with a female relative, provides the mother with an important relief at difficult times, and fosters healthy parent-child relationships.

The extended family has been noted as a source of strength. Black children who live in mother/grandmother families have social and emotional adjustments approximate to those of children living in mother/father families; they show higher levels of adjustment than children who live with their mothers alone.

Effects of maternal employment

The impact of maternal employment is a subject for much argumentation in the current literature. An excellent review by Hoffman (5) summarizes the research base on the child outcomes of maternal employment in two-parent families. She notes that parental attitudes towards mothers' work seem to

be more important in defining child outcome than the mother's employment status. Children who have working mothers appear to have less restricted views of sex roles. Boys with employed mothers in blue collar families appear to do better on measures of cognitive development and socioemotional adjustment.

When women work, there is no necessary adverse effect on marital relationships. In the studies which suggest differences between marital adjustments in women who work and women who do not, negative correlations between maternal employment and marital satisfaction occur where there is resentment of the employment by either parent, where sex role definitions are traditional, where the father is the reporter of the data, and where the sample is impoverished. In more affluent and more well educated homes, where the mother works part-time, and where the mother reports the data, the marital relationship is more likely to be satisfying. Hoffman notes several studies of well-educated dual-career couples, where both parents report that the marriage was enhanced by the mother's career. The impact on children of having two parents who work suggest that employed mothers compensate for their absences in the amount of time devoted to direct interaction with a child when they are not at work. Fathers in dual-wage homes, by contrast, appear to be less actively engaged with infant children. They may be "squeezed out" during the time which might otherwise be set aside for father-infant interaction in single-wage households.

Attachment between parents and infants does not appear to be strongly associated with maternal work. With regard to gender differences, maternal employment appears to be beneficial for daughters. It is associated, for example, with girls favorable scores on social adjustment, school performance, and professional acomplishments, as well as with beliefs that women, like men, can be competent in the world of work.

Hoffman suggests that maternal employment in and of itself is not a substantial contributor to child psychological outcome. It appears to operate through its impact on the family environment and on child care arrangements; these are moderated by parental attitudes, family structure, and other variables. Highly important among these appears to be economic status.

Obviously, without maternal employment, many families would suffer serious economic adversity. The ambivalence of husbands may be a larger problem, Hoffman suggests. For traditional fathers, a spouse's employment may be distressing. Their cooperation in child care and in other family tasks may be ambivalent. This in turn, may be associated with more stress in the parental relationship and a diminished capacity to give consistent support to their spouses. In the face of parental conflicts, there is a greater likelihood of adverse psychological outcomes for children.

Sexual abuse allegations in divorce

When marriages dissolve, there is nearly always conflict with regard to the care of children and to the resources of the household. In many cases of divorce and custody conflict, allegations are made about the sexual abuse of a child (6). There is a great deal of conflict about how valid these accusations may be. Are they an artifact of the adversarial legal system, placed in mothers' minds by aggressive counsel? A study of 169 cases in 12 domestic relations courts throughout the United States suggests that fewer than 2% of custody and visitation conflicts in the context of divorce involve allegations of sexual abuse. Fathers were accused in 51% of the cases; allegations were also made against step-parents, extended family members, and mothers. In the 129 cases where it was possible to make a determination of the validity of allegations, 50% were found to involve abuse, 33% were not, and 17% were ruled indeterminant. Validity of the abuse allegations appeared significantly to be associated with four factors: (older) age of the victim, frequency of the alleged abuse, whether there had been prior reports of neglect or abuse, and the amount of time which elapsed between the filing for divorce and the emergence of the allegation.

Convergence of child and woman abuse

Recent work has also focused on the impact of the physical abuse of women in relation to the risk of abuse of children (7). Physical violence is associated with the decision to seek divorce for many women. In one survey, 37% of women seeking divorce reported having been physically abused. Researchers in the family violence field have also noted the increased risk of child abuse in families where women report experiences of violence. A controlled study of the victimization of mothers of abused children suggested a 59.4% concurrence of maternal victimization and child abuse. This suggests a need for a more embracive view of child abuse, focusing also on the well-being and safety of the mother; professionals must also consider the risk of child abuse when a battered woman is identified.

Stress impacts on children

Stress is increasingly understood to have both psychological and physical implications. These are reviewed impressively in a paper by Boyce and Jemiren, which explores in depth the relationships between psychosocial stresses and physical and emotional health, summarizing the existing body of longitudinal studies and the principal previous reviews in the literature (8). The physiology of responses to emotional stress; focuses on neuroendocrine mechanisms, endogenous opiates, the immune system, and secondary hormonal effects.

The authors treat carefully the problems in current research, noting that there have been only modest influences discerned of stressful effects on subsequent health. (The strongest predictors of physical symptoms in the present are physical symptoms in the past; undesirable life events are best predicted by a past history of similar events. Low correlations between life events and illness appear both to be artifacts of the definition of stress and problematic study designs. Physiological and behavioral differences in stress response may have importantly to do with the unevenness in the distribution of childhood morbidity; epidemiologic studies suggest that a distinct subgroup of individuals [15-20% of a given population] suffers a disproportionate share of the total morbidity. Children who utilize pediatric services most frequently tend to have multiple types of morbidity, including physical and emotional problems, as well as illnesses at various degrees of acuteness.)

Boyce and Jemiren suggest that future work might focus on identifying individual differences in susceptibility to stress, leading to the development of a perspective which would overturn the "arbitrary separation of the environment from the individual," and identify stressful events as "the interactive product of environmental and organismic processes." The paper goes far to support the development of the biopsychosocial model long sought by those eager to supplant the rigid mind-body distinctions found in much pediatric research and practice. Building a stronger knowledge base will require both more serious theorizing of this kind and more focused biobehavioral and psychosomatic research.

Pediatric social illness

A comparative study of child developmental, familial and environmental characteristics in child abuse and failure to thrive lends additional support to the need for more embracive understandings of stress in the family and its associated child outcomes (9). Victims of child abuse and failure to thrive were compared with one another on a range of family attributes.

Few differences were discerned with regard to maternal background, support, and current living situation; the child's developmental, social, and health characteristics; and maternal disposition toward the child. The major difference appeared to be connected with social class: the abuse group lived in greater poverty and in more crowded conditions. The authors suggest that the concept of "pediatric social illness" is an apt reformulation for both child abuse and failure to thrive, focusing attention less on the symptomatic outcome (injury or growth failure) than on the social setting in which children (with their innate attributes) cared for by parents (responding in distinct and individualized ways to social and psychological stresses) become vulnerable to the expression of particular symptoms of ill health. They suggest a need for interdisciplinary approaches to clinical practice, and a more broadly conceived notion of causality for research on family stresses and adverse child outcomes.

Homelessness

The association between homelessness and disturbances of children's mental health has been described in several studies, and a recent report by Bassuk and Rosenberg gives impressive new support to the hypothesis that homelessness is a marker for severe risk for child psychological disorders and school failure (10). A comparative study of 86 children from 49 homeless families and 134 children from 81 housed families, all headed by women, indicated that developmental delays were more prevalent among preschool homeless children and depression, anxiety, and behavioral disturbance were more prevalent among school-aged homeless children.

Does violence breed violence?

If a child is a victim of violence, is there a greater likelihood that he will grow up to be a violent adult? This is the subject of an impressive current review by one of the country's leading violence researchers (11). Widom critically examined the "violence breeds violence" hypothesis and concluded that existing knowledge of the long-term consequences of abusive home environments remains limited and that conclusions about the strength of a positive association need to be tempered, because the amount of convincing empirical data is small.

Violent death

Patterns of etiology of violent deaths to children were identified in an important study by Christoffel (12). Males outnumbered females, by more substantial margins after the first year of life. Nearly a third of the victims were under a year of age. Parents figured predominantly as the perpetrators of homicide of victims under 5, and fathers were involved in more than half of these tragedies. There was a distinct set of circumstances associated with violent death to younger children: blunt injury, arson, falls, and burns. Older children died more often of firearm injuries, hit-and-run accidents, and strangulations and stabbings. The mother's boyfriend was the culprit in nearly half of the cases in which the perpetrator was identified as a babysitter.

The authors conclude that the time has come to move from descriptive studies to intervention trials to prevent violent death. Because the deaths of the youngest children were overwhelmingly associated with neglect or maltreatment, preventive approaches should focus on increasing the quality of child care-giving, particularly with regard to offering alternative options to violence when children make adults angry. Because pre-adolescents and adolescents appeared to die when the youngsters did not sufficiently well appreciate danger or were unable to escape from it, there is a need for the provision of self-protection skills, both for girls, who are more likely to receive such instruction, and for boys.

Future directions for practice

The changing state of the family and the increasing understanding of the impacts of adversity on children have stimulated a new awareness of the need to support families and to cushion the effects of stress on children's development. A study of the relationship between maternal social support (resources made available through relationships with others which provide emotional and tangible benefits to an individual, including a sense of meaning, belonging, acceptance, as well as information, transportation, and help with child care) and its relationship to self-esteem of mothers and satisfaction with their roles, suggests that there is an important buffering effect of social support on parental stress (13). The study also indicates that more maternal education is associated with lower levels of parental stress.

The family support movement

A family support movement has grown in the last decade, taking cognizance of the effectiveness of such comprehensive programs as Head Start and the fact that current social service programs simply are unable to meet the needs of families. Family functioning is proposed to be inextricable from the realities (and the adversities) of the life setting in which the family finds itself. Many of these support programs are grass roots efforts, offering, for example, home visitors who provide friendly and warm connections to knowledgeable professionals, linkages between parents, and education about children and child rearing (13).

The focus of these programs is on sustaining strengths in families rather than on compensating for their faults; they are especially concerned to correct the perceived focus of many welfare programs on family deficits. These may be biased, the leaders of the movement suggest, against poor people and cultural and ethnic minorities. The programs are also concerned to prevent family breakup, i.e. to assure to the extent possible that family members can stay together (and that foster home placement of children can be prevented), even in the face of a history of violence. The philosophy, techniques, and limitations of this movement, are described comprehensively by Zigler and Black (14). In their generally optomistic review, they give an important caveat. These programs cannot supplant the needs for large-scale, and more costly, social initiatives to address child care, poverty, and crises which require professional services. These will take political will and longer-term commitments of resources.

The work and family movement

Another movement, fostering a balance between the tasks of employment and the giving care to kin, is gaining ground in industry. Employers are increasingly mindful of the impact on women employees of responsibilities to give care to their children as well as to aging, infirm parents. A fine review by Zedeck and Mosier (15) summarizes the major program directions. Initiatives in the corporate world include providing maternity and paternity leaves, assisting employees in getting child and dependent (generally elder) care, facilitating alternative work schedules

(flextime, part-time and job sharing), changing the locus of work (alternative work stations and telecommuting), and initiating employee assistance programs which address such problems as family violence and substance abuse, and giving relocation assistance. It is clear that employers are learning that family problems cost them money. Work-family programs are responsive both to the economic downside of family stresses and to the trend toward more humane managerial perspectives toward employees, more and more of whom are women.

Annotated references and recommended reading

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* Of interest

** Of outstanding interest

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